PANFISH LIMITS

As recently as 1999, North Dakota did not have a daily or possession limit for fish generally lumped into a group called panfish, which includes yellow perch, bluegill, crappie and white bass. An angler could take as many foot-long fat perch or plate-sized crappie as he or she wanted to clean.

Since then, however, Game and Fish Department biologists have, with every new two-year fishing proclamation, consistently recommended new, lower limits, or have added fish that were not previously covered.

An abbreviated chronology looks like this:

2000 – Established daily limit of 50 and possession limit of 250 for yellow perch and crappie.

2002 – Reduced perch and crappie limit to 35 daily and 175 in possession, and added those same guidelines for bluegill.

2004 – Added white bass to list of fish with 35/175 limit.

In 2006, more adjustments are coming. When the new proclamation takes effect April 1, the perch, crappie, bluegill and white bass limits will be reduced to 20 daily and 80 in possession. In addition, on a few lakes Game and Fish is experimenting with an even more conservative limit structure.

All of this is part of a progressive effort to find a daily/possession limit combination that maintains angler interest and also addresses concerns that quality panfish lakes are becoming "fished out."

The limit reduction is primarily directed at conserving perch fisheries, though there is also concern about high crappie and bluegill harvest on certain waters. White bass are included to keep limits consistent among all panfish species.

Fifteen years ago, North Dakota didn't really have a need for panfish limits. In addition to Devils Lake, the state had only a few quality perch fisheries where anglers could expect to catch a handful or more of fish measuring eight inches or longer, the size of fish most anglers consider "keepers."

A few lakes also had quality-sized bluegill or crappie, but fishing pressure was typically low enough so the fish population could maintain itself.

Many other lakes had perch, bluegill or crappie, but these fish were often stunted and undesirable to anglers, regardless of the limit. The situation has improved markedly since then.

The transformation of mostly dry prairie potholes into lakes deep enough to support long-term fisheries has over time changed the Game and Fish Department's philosophy toward panfish management. Since 1993, the number of manageable fishing lakes in North Dakota has more than tripled. These new waters provided ideal conditions for fish populations to thrive.

Developing perch lakes that were "discovered" sometimes attracted hundreds of anglers over a weekend, not surprising considering fish of 10-12 inches and up to a pound or more were common catches. Without limits, some anglers took home a hundred or more of these fish in a day – and did so for several days in a row.

Even with limits of 50 or 35, similar angling pressure meant perhaps thousands of keeper fish taken out in a single weekend. It is also not surprising that such concentrated fishing pressure served to turn many a new quality perch fishery into a has-been in just one winter.

Biologists were justifiably concerned, but history suggested that prairie pothole lake fisheries were generally short-lived anyway. A typical pattern involved a boost of water from spring runoff or summer rain that would provide enough depth to justify stocking fish – usually northern pike and perch. If the lake maintained its depth for a few years, a fishery would develop. Prairie precipitation patterns as they are, the lake would eventually evaporate to a point where a hard winter would kill most or all of the fish. With that pattern as their guide, fisheries managers appreciated that anglers were able to catch most of the harvestable fish in these lakes before they were wiped out by winterkill.

That same philosophy prevailed in the early stages of the current prairie fishery boom. But instead of receding over time, prairie lakes got another boost through the late 1990s. Instead of 10-12 feet deep marginal fisheries that developed initially, North Dakota biologists were confronted with the exciting challenge of lakes 20-25-feet deep with the potential for productive long-term management. To accomplish that required some protections.

Now, the water cycle has turned a bit toward the downside again and many lakes have receded to the point where they aren't as productive as they once were. Some have been labeled as fished out, and every winter it seems a new water is discovered that attracts tremendous fishing pressure until the bite tails off.

CRAIG BIHRLE

Big perch like this are highly valued by North Dakota anglers. A proposal for a reduced daily limit is intended to spread out angling harvest so fisheries that produce quality perch can sustain that production over a longer period of time.

Game and Fish biologists did a study on Froelich Dam in Sioux County in the mid-1990s that indicated about 60 percent of the lake's entire perch population, and 90 percent of the big perch, were taken out during a six-week period of intense fishing pressure.

One key to fish and wildlife management is harvest limits that encourage people to participate and take surplus animals, but leave enough to sustain a balanced population from year to year. Liberal limits allow anglers to "skim" off a high percentage of the larger panfish in a water body. This type of selective harvest can negatively impact the quality of panfish populations in many waters.

One good year of fishing followed by several bad years, even when lake habitat conditions are decent, is a reasonable indicator of overharvest.

State biologists have been studying panfish more intently over the past several years and feel reduced limits are warranted. They won't necessarily protect every fishery from overharvest within a year, but they will likely spread fishing pressure out over a longer period of time.

Still, not everyone agrees that such reduced panfish limits are necessary on a statewide basis, and that's why we're taking a look at this issue, From Both Sides.

One Side

• Creel surveys over the past few years have indicated that few anglers actually catch and keep a limit of panfish on a daily basis, so a reduced limit will not affect very many people.

• Reduced panfish limits will sustain a quality fishery in some lakes for a longer period of time, enticing anglers to keep coming back to take advantage of the good fishing.

• Twenty 1-pound perch, bluegill or crappie is plenty of fish for one angler to keep in a day.

• Taking out too many large panfish from a lake, especially if there is not a healthy year-class to replace them, could reduce reproduction potential substantially, thereby hurting the fishery for several years down the road.

The Other Side

• Lower limits are not needed on lakes where one or more panfish populations are out of balance and could stand much higher harvest than is occurring. However, on lakes with stunted panfish populations, there is typically little interest from anglers.

• Anglers could perceive lower limits as a reason to forego traveling to destinations that once had higher limits and better fishing. On the other hand, the Missouri River System once had a daily limit of 10 walleye. Fishing effort on the system has increased dramatically in the last 20 years since the limit was reduced to five walleye per day.

• Because of the cyclic nature of many North Dakota prairie lakes, panfish, especially perch populations, can thrive and then virtually disappear because of winterkill or changing habitats due to reduced water levels. Higher limits allow greater use of larger fish by anglers, rather than having them die at the hands of nature. Predicting when a lake may have trouble, however, is difficult.

What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an e-mail at ndgf@nd.gov; call us at 328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.